

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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Pruning Deciduous Trees, Shrubs and Woody Vines Can Be Done Any Time in March By Jim May

March is here and all throughout the Virginia nursery industry, growers and nursery operators are performing their yearly pruning of trees and shrubs to prepare for the upcoming spring selling season. Orchard operators and grape growers are getting their pruning done before the weather warms up and the trees and vines wake from their winter rest to begin a new season of growth. We homeowners, too, would be wise to get our deciduous shrubs pruned before mowing and other gardening chores take over.

Correct pruning is an essential management practice for trees, shrubs and woody vines. Late winter and early spring afford an opportune time to do it while leaves are gone and the plant's framework is in full view. Pruning helps keep shrubs vigorous, promotes flowering and fruit development, maintains them in proper shape and form and can add valuable years to their life.

Prune deciduous shrubs to maintain their natural habit of growth. If, for example, a mature shrub has an open-arching habit, try to maintain that and don't prune it into a ball or cube shape. Too often Forsythia (*Forsythia x intermedia*) is pruned improperly into geometric shapes and at the wrong time of year. Forsythia has a cane-type growth habit and proper pruning includes removing one-third of the oldest canes by cutting them off at ground level every year. This encourages new growth and more flowering.

With most shrubs, the ideal time to prune is during the dormant season before new growth begins. However, early spring flowering shrubs like Forsythia, Rhododendron (*Rhododendron* spp.) and Lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*), should be pruned shortly after flowering. Pruning these early spring-flowering shrubs before flowering will remove flower buds, greatly reducing flower production.

Shrubs that bloom in the summer can be pruned now and still have time to form this summer's flower buds. Butterfly Bushes (*Buddleia davidii*) can be pruned now by cutting them down to within 12 inches of the ground, leaving several buds on each stem. Other shrubs that bloom on current season's growth include Glossy Abelia (*Abelia x grandiflora*), Rose-of-Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*), Virginia Sweetspire (*Itea virginica*), Purple Beautyberry (*Callicarpa dichotoma*) PeeGee Hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'Grandiflora'), Carolina Allspice (*Calycanthus floridus*) and Summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*)

In general, most deciduous shrubs should be thinned out rather than sheared. Save shearing for formal hedges. Thinning out prevents excessive or unsightly branch formation at the top of the plant and maintains the natural habit of growth. Thinning is done by cutting off a branch where it is

attached to the main stem. This method, the least conspicuous of all types of pruning, is best used on plants that are too dense. To develop branches that grow toward the outside of the plant, remove the inward growing branches and prune to an outward facing bud or branch.

Prune branches at the point of attachment to another branch or back to a bud. Pruning just above a bud prevents dieback of the stem, and a new branch will develop from the bud. Shearing causes dense growth to develop at the ends of the branches. Such growth shades the rest of the plant, which gradually loses its lower foliage and becomes sparse and spindly-looking.

You can maintain plants at a given height and width for years by thinning. This method of pruning is best done with hand pruning shears, not hedge shears. Thin out the oldest and tallest stems first.

Older shrubs that have become too large or contain considerable unproductive wood should be rejuvenated. Prune the plant by cutting off the oldest branches at the ground, leaving only the young stems. If there are not many younger stems, remove the older wood over a three-year period to maintain the overall shape of the plant. New shoots that develop can be cut back to various lengths by the thinning-out method, which encourages the development of strong branches.

Plants that often become overgrown and benefit from rejuvenation include Forsythia, Honeysuckle (*Lonicera* spp.), Spirea (*Spirea* spp.), Viburnum (*Viburnum* spp.), Weigela (*Weigela florida*) and other fast-growing types. These plants, if extensively overgrown, severely weakened or otherwise unhealthy, can be cut back to the ground but may not bloom for one or several years, depending on the rate of regrowth.

Pruning is sometimes necessary when shrubs are transplanted. Light pruning of roots or tops may be needed if they are broken, damaged or dead. Prune tops by the thinning-out method to reduce the overall height and width of the young plant by 10 to 25 percent.

Shrubs transplanted with a ball of soil (B&B) or from a container often will not require much pruning. Occasionally, branches may have been damaged in transit, and these should be removed at planting. Many times the root system of container grown plants will be crowded or growing spirally inside the container. Score or cut through the roots in several places to encourage new outward growth of roots.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.